DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 401 TM 028 963

AUTHOR Hansen, Joe B.
TITLE Evaluating the Evaluators: The External Evaluator's Perspective.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Methods; *Evaluators; *Program Evaluation; *School Districts
IDENTIFIERS External Evaluation; *Lincoln Public Schools NE; *Meta Evaluation

ABSTRACT

The question of who evaluates the evaluators is explored through the experiences of an external evaluation team. Some have called evaluating evaluators and their work evaluation auditing, but it could also be viewed as a form of meta-evaluation. At the request of the Director of Research and Evaluation for the "ESU 18" (named for a county administrative unit) evaluation team in Lincoln (Nebraska), three directors of research and evaluation in other school districts (DREs) formed an external visitation team (EVT) to conduct a meta-evaluation of the Evaluation Team of the initiative (ET). The ET has a unique relationship to the Lincoln Public Schools because it is housed in the same building but is administratively separate, reporting to a county administrative unit. This gives the ET the advantage of being independent, and less subject to pressure to conduct evaluations that create positive public relations for the school district. By the same token, their independence lends credibility to their studies and reports. Challenges exist, at least theoretically, in that the program staff members who receive the evaluations are under little obligation to pay attention to them. This results in a need for the ET to work closely with school district staff to demonstrate the value of their contribution to instruction program quality. This they have accomplished admirably. The Lincoln Public School staff viewed the ESU18 evaluators as intelligent, thoughtful, creative problem solvers and facilitators. These evaluators were seen as adding value to the educational system. Results also show that using the EVT to conduct an evaluation of the evaluators is both viable and useful. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 422 401

Evaluating the Evaluators: the external evaluator's perspective

Joe B. Hansen
Colorado Springs School District Eleven

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Joe Hansen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Presentation in the symposium: Evaluating the Evaluators: How Should We Evaluate the Effectiveness of Evaluation Units?

American Educational Research Association - Division H
San Diego, CA
April , 1998

TM028963

Evaluating the Evaluators: the external evaluator's perspective

Joe B. Hansen
Colorado Springs School District Eleven

This symposium poses a significant question for all evaluation practitioners - *Who evaluates the evaluators?* This venerable question has been the subject of discussion and AERA presentations for nearly three decades. It is rife with implications for maintaining a measure of quality control over the evaluation enterprise, just as that enterprise purports to do with the educational programs and services it evaluates. Some have dubbed evaluating evaluators and their work evaluation auditing but it could also be viewed as a form of meta-evaluation.

The earliest use of the term "meta-evaluation" may have been by Scriven (1972) in *An Introduction to Meta-Evaluation,* where he refers to meta-evaluation as a "second order evaluation," with both theoretical and practical dimensions. Stufflebeam (1978) defined "meta-evaluation" as the evaluation of evaluations. He distinguished between "primary evaluations," those that are the subject of meta-evaluations and the meta-evaluations themselves. His seminal work in this area proposed standards and guidelines for judging the quality of evaluations that foreshadowed the eventual development of *The Standards for the Evaluation of Educational Programs, Projects and Materials* (Joint Committee for Educational Evaluation, 1981.) Wentling and Klit (1973) described the meta-evaluation of a statewide system for evaluating the occupational education programs of local education agencies in Illinois. Their work extended the concept of meta-evaluation to that of evaluating not only the evaluations, but the system responsible for those evaluations, including the personnel. I discussed a process for quality control in Title-I evaluation in 1977, based on the role of an evaluation auditor, overseeing the evaluations of Title-I programs (Hansen, 1977.) In that article, I laid out a series of issues to be addressed by anyone attempting to evaluate the work of other evaluators. More recently, meta-evaluation has been incorporated into the *Program Evaluation Standards(Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 1994)* as a standard (A12.) Briefly, the standard on meta-evaluation states:

> *"The evaluation itself should be formatively and summatively evaluated against these and other pertinent standards, so that its conduct is appropriately guided and, on completion, stakeholders can closely examine its strengths and weaknesses."* (P 259)

The process described in the Novak paper and here, applies the concept of meta-evaluation to an evaluation unit and the services it provides to a public school system. Whereas meta-evaluation usually focuses on an individual evaluation study or process and asks questions about its adequacy as to its methods and procedures, data interpretation, conclusions, recommendations and so on; the process engaged in by the external visitation team (E.T.) for ESU 18, examined the broad range of services provided by the ESU evaluation unit staff and sought to provide formative

evaluation recommendations that the ESU 18 Evaluation Team (ET) could use to refine and improve its evaluation services to Lincoln Public Schools (LPS).

As one of the external evaluators in this process, I will address the following questions:

- What was the role of the external visitation team and what did the team do during the visitation?
- Were there any restrictions placed on the visitation team? If so, did the restrictions bias the evaluation results/findings?
- What did the external team learn during the evaluation and how were those findings communicated?
- What issues and questions should have been addressed in the evaluation, but were not?
- What did the external team learn about this process that would be of value to others considering this type of evaluation?

I will address each of these questions sequentially.

What was the role of the external visitation team and what did the team do during the visitation?

The EVT had the purpose of validating or verifying the self study, previously conducted by the ESU 18 Evaluation Team (ET) and providing additional observations and recommendations to help the ET meet its goals. In other words this was a *formative meta-evaluation* of the ET. The approach taken by the EVT was to meet with LPS administrative staff, who had received evaluation or evaluation support services from the ET and elicit their observations of the ET's performance. Three people, each of whom was a director of research and evaluation (DRE) in a school district, comprised the EVT.[1] Each of the three members of the EVT was asked to focus on a particular aspect of the ET or its work. One focused on the *district assessment program and the quality of work done on it.* Another focused on the *quality of work done on projects.* The third focused primarily on *internal operations and how projects were assigned to the team.*

Methodology

The methodology used by the EVT consisted of document review, interviews with individual LPS administrators, interviews or discussions with groups of administrators and a discussion with the ET professional staff. Documents reviewed included:

---

[1]. The three team members were Michael Herrick, Eau Claire, Public Schools; Stephan Henry, Topeka Public Schools; and Joe Hansen, Colorado Springs Public Schools. The work reported here was performed by the entire team, not just the author. This paper is presented with the approval of the other members.

Hansen, External Perspective

- ESU 18 Evaluation Team Accreditation Studies Part 1: Background
- ESU 18 Evaluation Team Accreditation Studies Part 2: Results and Recommendations
- A list of Evaluation Team Programs and Projects included in the Self Study
  - 1996-97 ESU Evaluation Team Project Time Log Report
  - 1996-97 Time use Reports
  - 1995-96 ESU Evaluation Team Project Time Log Report
  - 1995-96 Time Use Reports
- Improving Assessment Practices in the Lincoln Public Schools: The Final Report of the Assessment Study Committee.

After reviewing these documents the EVT members elected to adopt the five key questions used in the Self Study as a framework for our review. Those questions are as follows:

1. Do current Evaluation Team assignments and past assignments, reflect district priorities?
2. Does the work done by the Evaluation Team on those assignments conform to the generally accepted standards for educational evaluation and does that work meet the needs of their clients?
3. How can the team best support the district over the next two to five years?
4. Are the principles described in Part 1 of the Self Study still relevant and are the procedures followed by the Evaluation Team consistent with these principles?
5. Does the Evaluation Team have the support staff and resources necessary to be successful and are the support staff and resources used efficiently?

Our EVT conducted interviews and group meetings with the following individuals and groups. The Associate Superintendent for Instruction, Instructional Division Directors for Staff Development, Special Education, Student Services, Library/media services; the Administrative Assistant for Curriculum and Instruction; Consultants for Math, Business Education, Early Childhood, Elementary Reading and Language Arts; the Curriculum Director, Externally Funded Grants staff and Principals of four Schools that had received grants for assessment and instructional improvement. They included a high school, a middle school and two elementary schools.

The three EVT reviewers also met with the ET professional staff. At the end of the visit our EVT conducted an exit interview and provided our findings, commendations and suggestions for improvement.

Were there any restrictions placed on the visitation team? If so, did the restrictions bias the evaluation results/findings?

The only restrictions we experienced were those that derived from the schedule and logistics of

the study. The EVT had an evening meeting with the Leadership Team of the ESU on the first night, to receive an orientation to our task. We then had one day to collect data and prepare our recommendations. With more time, we might have had an opportunity to pursue in greater depth, some of the issues and questions that arose naturally out of our interviews and discussions. We could have also sought out input from other staff who were not preselected for us. Although it is doubtful that such input would have varied significantly from that which we received, it is possible that we might have heard some constructive criticism of, or possibly even dissatisfaction with the ET. I don't believe however, that the lack of opportunity for such follow up resulted in a bias. More time would have enabled us to develop more detailed and tightly focused recommendations and to validate the findings.

What did the external team learn during the evaluation and how were those findings communicated?

Following the five study questions they gave us, we learned much about how ET priorities were set, the quality of the ET staff, applicability of the *Evaluation Standards* in the ET's work, the level of satisfaction clients felt with the ET's work, the advantages of the unique organizational relationship of the ET to LPS, the role of ET staff, and the need for assessment planning.

Priorities. The ET Director (Dr. Novak) had established a clear process for arriving at priorities and setting goals. He had also established a procedure for tracking and monitoring staff time by project. Key administrators were familiar with and supportive of the ET's priorities. These same key administrators felt involved in the ET's priority setting process and were sympathetic to the ET for not having more time to devote to providing consulting assistance, which was viewed by the curriculum and instruction staff as highly beneficial. Some LPS directors felt that the ET doesn't really get to set their own priorities; that instead they are set for them. State and federal requirements come first, followed by whatever the superintendent and Board want, then they allocate the rest of their time to projects. The ET staff felt this was an accurate depiction.

It was obvious to the EVT that the ET and LPS engage in systematic strategic planning in which assessment projects are designed to contribute to the district mission and strategic plan for instruction. Although the ET reported struggling with limited resources and that district priorities were not always clear, the district consumers of their services were very pleased with their work. These customers reported to the EVT that they understood that the ET had multiple audiences and had to allocate their limited resources among many potential project areas. We heard no criticism regarding the manner in which the ET allocated staff time to projects. Despite the commitment "up-front" to a heavy project load, the visiting team heard repeatedly that the Evaluation Team routinely responds to on-the-fly requests for custom data analysis and does so in a very timely manner. The recipients of the ET's services were pleased with the service they had received and praised the ET for the quality of its work.

Quality of staff. The ET consists of a highly trained and highly experienced staff who have earned the respect of district colleagues. They are called upon regularly to support program planning and development efforts for the district and have had a positive impact on the district's effectiveness by promoting a research-based scholarly approach to district planning and program development. Comments heard about the ET in interviews included "They really help us improve instruction," "They are good at making suggestions," and "They are there when I need them."

LPS administrators recognized the evaluators as seeing the "big picture." That is, they see the need to visualize ultimate outcomes of programs, and see connections to other programs within the district. In addition, they viewed them as objective, unbiased, and expert data collectors. They were considered able to analyze a problem and communicate results of an analysis clearly to staff and to parents. They were also recognized for being honest in their interpretation of data. ET members are not compromised into presenting findings that are "acceptable" as opposed to accurate. In short, evaluators lend credibility and accountability to program development.

Evaluation Standards. LPS administrators were not explicitly aware of the *Evaluation Standards*, but we listened for evidence of their application in the work of the ET. We heard respondents mention two concepts repeatedly that implied the evaluation standards of ***utility*** and *accuracy* were highly applicable to the work of the ET. The greatest utility by far, offered to the LPS by the ET is that of helping program staff think more clearly about their programs and plan more effectively. LPS staff attributed this, in part, to the ET's focus on outcomes and effects and their search for evidence of the outcomes. Because of the involvement of an evaluator, they asked and attended to research and evaluation questions during the conduct of program evaluations and program development activities. Evaluators are valued because they "ask the questions that need to be asked" and they question how data proposed for an evaluation can best be used. One curriculum consultant commented that evaluators "define purpose and direction" for projects and programs, and "help us be more thoughtful and purposeful." Evaluators are considered key players that provide significant leadership because of the way they think. Evaluators think in terms of outcomes and effects, and evidence needed to determine outcomes. The evidence from interviews supported the belief that the LPS was a research-based and data-driven district, largely because of the work of the ET.

Further evidence of the utility of evaluation studies conducted by the ET, expressed by staff, is that the culture in the Lincoln Public Schools is that of a "research-based district." There appears to be a culture in the district that appreciates research and evaluation for providing programs with a focus and that staff supports by asking, "what does the research tell us." The ET director meets with curriculum directors monthly to review research and discuss upcoming projects. Respondents felt that this kind of regular contact helps the district to keep evaluation central to program planning and implementation.

Organizational relationship of the Evaluation Team to Lincoln Public Schools. All respondents acknowledged that the ET has a unique organizational relationship with the LPS. Because ESU 18 is technically an external organization, evaluations conducted by the ET are external evaluations. However, because of the way evaluations are conducted, with evaluators functioning as valued consultants and professional colleagues, the evaluations are considered as internal. Everyone we talked to indicated that the relationship of the ESU and the district is ideal for evaluation. When perceptions by the public or external funding agencies suspect bias, program leaders legitimately claim the evaluations are independent and external. However, all evaluations are conducted with a high degree of collegiality and teaming. This collegial and participatory approach to evaluation is advantageous in that the evaluators understand district programs and have a working knowledge of the district as a whole. Also, their continuity in conducting evaluations in the district gives them a "big picture" perspective that even Directors and Curriculum Consultants may not have. This closeness of the evaluation function and program operations does not seem to jeopardize the accuracy and validity of data or the honesty with which those data are reported. It also aids in the implementation of study findings and recommendations.

Members of the ET indicated that they feel even more independent than a private consultant might be because their jobs are secure regardless of their evaluation findings. They feel no pressure to produce positive results for the purpose of gaining repeat business.

Role of the evaluator. The ET members and most users of evaluation studies see the role of evaluator as providing direction for the evaluation in collaboration with the rest of the team, and being exclusively responsible for conducting the actual study. For the most part, their responsibility ends with the delivery of an evaluation report. The program staff is responsible for sharing the results and recommendations of the study. However, the division of those roles and responsibilities is not clear cut. ET staff considers this a strength. Program staff frequently call on evaluators to assist in implementation. Evaluators do this by explaining and interpreting findings to various groups and stakeholders, providing staff development to relevant groups and by consulting with directors and consultants on proper implementation. Ultimately, however, program staff is accountable for insuring proper implementation. Directors and Curriculum Consultants were quick to indicate that the evaluation role makes program success more likely.

The primary role that evaluators play was described as that of *a consultant*. This works very well because it gives the evaluator an equal position on a curriculum or project team. The project team is lead by the person responsible for the program, curriculum area, or the project. Although this may appear as an unconventional role for an evaluator, it seems to work well for the ET and LPS.

Need for an Assessment Plan. Increased demands for assessment driven reform have, in recent years, resulted in a shift in focus of staff time and energies from traditional program evaluation studies to a far greater emphasis on assessment related consultation. It appeared to us that the time had come for the ET to help the LPS to develop a comprehensive assessment plan to address current and future assessment needs. The ET staff supported this view.

Communication of Results

We communicated our EVT's findings in two ways. First, through an exit interview meeting with ESU leadership and key LPS administrators. In that meeting we shared our observations and preliminary recommendations. Second, each EVT member had the responsibility for writing a section of a report we would remit to the ESU. In addition to writing my section, I acted as the editor, collecting the separate pieces via e-mail, editing them and developing an integrated document from them. Each EVT member was then e-mailed a draft to review and edit further. I incorporated this input into the final report document and submitted it to the ESU.

What issues and questions should have been addressed in the evaluation, but were not?

Given the constraints of time imposed on this review or meta-evaluation, the EVT had all it could handle in addressing the questions that were provided. An issue that emerged naturally from the process was that of how the ET might leverage or extend its limited resources to increase its effectiveness. Our recommendations dealt with this only tangentially, by suggesting more ET involvement in staff development, especially for principals in the interpretation and use of data for instructional improvement, and providing some additional funding to the ET for outsourcing some projects.

What did the external team learn about this process that would be of value to others considering this type of evaluation?

The evaluation process was loosely structured around the Self Study previously conducted by the ET. Time constraints precluded an adequate amount of planning time for the EVT members to develop and field test data collection protocols. Having such protocols would have made the data collection effort more systematic and better focused.

The EVT could also have benefitted from a better a-priori understanding of the relationship of the ET to each of the administrative units and groups we met with and individuals we interviewed. Again, this is a function of time. With the availability of one more day, we could have spent more time planning together and discussing our approach with the ET director, prior to beginning data collection. This would have helped us to develop a standard set of core questions to guide our investigations. Additional time beyond that would have been helpful in enabling us to conduct follow-up interviews where we felt a need for clarification, or to pursue a particular issue in

greater detail. For those considering an evaluation of the evaluators I would suggest the following guidelines.

1. Select the team members to represent areas of expertise relevant to the issues and problems that are most important to the study. Also, make the team large enough to enable sufficient access time to key respondents.

Our team consisted of three relatively senior DREs. This was a marginal number for the large number of LPS staff we needed to interact with. Fortunately, our backgrounds afforded us some diversity of perspective roughly consistent with the roles we were asked to assume. It would have been helpful to our team to have a person whose professional background and interests were more instructionally oriented. A curriculum director or assistant superintendent for instruction would have added a valuable perspective to our work.

2. Provide the external team with enough time together prior to beginning data collection so that they can work together to develop a set of core questions they will ask of all groups and individual interviewees, and some more specific questions for specific groups.

A reasonable procedure for getting ready to conduct the data analysis might be as follows.

A. The local on-site coordinator of the study should conduct an orientation meeting with the external team. This meeting should last a minimum of four hours and should have as its objectives:

1. developing a common understanding of the key issues to be addressed, the audiences involved and the relationships of those audiences and individuals to the evaluation unit being evaluated.
2. cooperatively developing a set of core questions to be asked of most, if not all respondents.
3. developing sub-sets of questions for groups and individuals based on their professional roles and their specific relationships to the evaluation unit.
4. reviewing, critiquing and refining the questions together.
5. arriving at an agreement on how interviews would be conducted for individuals and groups so that a well understood process is consistently used.

B. The visiting team should become familiar with the *Evaluation Standards* and use the Standards in formulating the core questions.

C. The team should identify a team leader who will coordinate the work and serve as a process facilitator for team discussions.

D. The on-site coordinator should conduct a general orientation meeting with the staff who will be involved in the study and the visiting team. In this meeting, the coordinator should explain the purpose of the study and introduce each of the external team members, describing their qualifications and roles in the study and the staff members. This will help the visiting team to establish their credibility and will make it easier for them to establish rapport with respondents.

E. The schedule must include enough time so that the external team can meet for 20 to 30 minutes twice each day, to check impressions with one another, ask questions of the coordinator, reflect on the data and decide on follow up needs.

F. An adequate amount of time must be allowed for data collection, review of notes and group time for the external team to develop their recommendations and review them together prior to the exit interview. The amount of time necessary for this is obviously a subjective judgement. However, it is likely that with the initial orientation meeting, the orientation with on-site staff who will be interviewed and the follow-up time needed for clarification and recommendation development, at least two full days on-site will be needed.

Summary and Conclusions

At the request of the Director of Research and Evaluation for the ESU 18 Evaluation Team, in Lincoln, Nebraska, three DREs formed an external visitation team or EVT to conduct a meta-evaluation of the Evaluation Team of the ESU. The ET has a unique relationship to the LPS, since it is housed in the same building, but is administratively separate, reporting to the ESU, a county administrative unit. This creates both challenges and opportunities for the ET staff in their relationship with the LPS administrators they serve. The ET has the advantage of being independent, therefore they are less subject to pressure to conduct evaluations that create positive public relations for the LPS but fail to provide the constructive criticism needed for improvement. By the same token, their independence lends credibility to their evaluation studies and reports. Challenges exist, at least theoretically, in that the LPS program staff members who are recipients of the evaluation services are under little obligation to pay any attention to them, except in the case of the federal and state mandated program evaluations. This results in a need for ET to work closely with the LPS staff to demonstrate the value of their contribution to instruction program quality. This they have accomplished admirably, resulting in a harmonious and symbiotic relationship and an increasing demand for their services.

LPS staff viewed ESU18 evaluators as intelligent, thoughtful, creative, problem solvers and facilitators, whose contributions improved the quality of district programs. Evaluators' participation was sought in planning, implementation and evaluation of district programs. They were uniformly viewed as adding value to the LPS educational system.

The process of conducting the evaluation of the evaluators was highly instructive to those of us who participated in it. We learned that a highly effective model for delivering evaluation services has been established in an out of the way Midwestern community, and that it has heretofore been a well-kept secret. I recommend that every public school evaluator who wants to see how evaluation can have a positive impact on public education, in a collaborative, non-traditional way, should schedule a visit with the Evaluation Team at ESU 18.

We also learned that the process of using an external visitation team or EVT to conduct an evaluation of the evaluators is both viable and useful. In this paper, I have outlined suggestions for structuring a process to enhance the effectiveness of the EVT. I also recommend to anyone considering this type of work, that they follow the *Evaluation Standards*. I encourage evaluators to form teams and visit each other's shops, conducting this form of collegial review. I would welcome feedback on the process I have outlined, in the hope that its refinement will lead to the development of a model for the evaluation of evaluation units and lead evaluators to the continuous improvement of their work.

References

Hansen, J. B. (1977, April). *Quality control in title-I Evaluation: problems and approaches.* Paper presented at annual meeting of American Educational Research Association, New York.

Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (1981). *Standards for the Evaluation of Educational programs, projects and materials.* New York, McGraw-Hill.

Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, (1994). *The Program Evaluation Standards, 2nd Edition.* Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publishing.

Scriven, M., (1972). An Introduction to Meta-evaluation. In Taylor, P.A. and Crowley, D. M. (Eds.) . *Readings in Curriculum Evaluation,* Dubuque, IA.; W. C. Brown Co.

Stufflebeam, D. L., (1978). *Meta Evaluation: an overview.* Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo.

Wentling, T.L. and Klit, J. A. (1973). *Meta-evaluation Applied: the evaluation of a large scale evaluation system.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.